Surrogate Tobacco Advertising during Durga Puja in Kolkata

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Sir,

The Durga Puja is a famous Hindu religious festival in Kolkata. Idols of the Hindu goddess Durga are worshipped in makeshift temples called “pandal” which are surrounded by art installations, colourful lights and music. This is celebrated every year, over 5–6 days, all over the city. Huge number of people, roughly estimated at 15-25 million, visit the city during this festival from all over Eastern India. A large number of these visitors are children and adolescents. Naturally, all the major consumer product companies have their ads and displays placed prominently at strategic locations all over the city to attract potential customers. This correspondence is about surrogate advertising techniques used by tobacco companies during this festival. Tobacco is responsible for many of the diseases with which patients come to the internist.

During the current (2018) Durga Puja in Kolkata, large temporary billboards displaying ads for “pan masala” could be seen all over the city near the puja pandals. Multiple brands were present and separate displays were made in all the major languages, i.e. English, Bengali and Hindi. The billboards were placed at prominent places, near bus stops, at entrance of pandals or at street crossings. One brand also used innovative techniques like 3D cut-outs and artistic installations. The billboards featured the name of the product prominently with eye-catching imagery like a successful businessman or images of the goddess Durga. One brand used a moderately famous Hindi film actor as model. No female models were used in the ads. There were messages and catchlines which equated the product with festivity or joy or success. Some ads used terms akin to royalty or tradition to associate the product with high status. Pictures of famous architectures were also used in some of the posters. The billboards also stated prominently that the products were free of tobacco or nicotine but at the same time, also stated that “pan masala is injurious to health”. Only one brand clearly stated “mix and eat” in the billboard which may be a direct reference to the actual tobacco product. One or two brands gave their facebook/twitter links or toll free contact numbers in the billboard.

Since it is customary in Bengali culture to exchange greetings and well wishes during this festival, almost all the pan masala billboards featured prominent puja greetings.

In India, advertisement of tobacco products in any form is completely prohibited1. This is according to the Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act (2003). However, like the alcohol industry, the tobacco industry is also adept at surrogate advertising. Surrogate advertising is a technique of duplicating the brand image of one product in a different product, when the original product is banned from being advertised in the mass media.2 This is also known as brand extension and is a devious way of bypassing the law.

In India, tobacco is popular in both smoking and smokeless forms. The smokeless forms are more popular. The GATS 2015-16 report for India showed that currently almost 30% of adult men and 13% of adult women in India use smokeless tobacco (SLT).3 Thus, SLT is a multi-billion dollar industry in India and its advertisement campaigns are equally aggressive.

A study from Bangalore, India assessed the effect of surrogate advertising on consumers.4 Gutkha and other SLT products are often promoted under the surrogate of pan masala. It was seen that potential consumers were well aware of the actual product and such surrogate advertising actually increased the consumption of the tobacco product.5 Thus, such prominent advertising of tobacco surrogate brands during a festival will likely result in an increase in consumption, especially among the adolescents.

Even if such advertisements are taken at their face value, that is, as ads for pan masala, still their displayed products are not harmless. Pan masala contains areca nut. In recent scientific studies, areca nut (supari) has been shown to have various adverse effects on different systems and moreover, it is also a carcinogen6. Thus, advertisement of even these products in a festival frequented by adolescents is not advisable.

This issue is highlighted because the Indian government is trying to curb the menace of tobacco in various ways. Recently a famous Hollywood actor was severely criticized for endorsing a “mouth-freshener” pan masala brand. Physicians are, and should be, at the forefront of tobacco control and elimination programs. Physicians are often summoned by the media and/or administrative officials as experts. Thus, physicians should be aware of such advertising techniques and their effect on different sections of the society. This will help in better health education to patients.

References